The Legend of the Chained Nikita

By Alexander Dallin

An inquiry into the bugbears, myths and illusions in Western analysis of Soviet affairs

One of the most astute observers of the contemporary Russian scene, Alexander Dallin is associate professor at the Columbia University Russian Institute. In assessing Soviet foreign policy objectives, Dallin calls for a factual review of Communist strategy by analysis of Soviet ideology, public statement and past performance, so that the USSR's outlook and objectives, as well as its tactics, are clarified.

THE BOTHERSOME U-2 story and the drama of the summit conference-that-was-none have provoked an orgy of speculation about Soviet motives and intentions. High officials and prominent newsmen have indulged in it more freely than at any time since Stalin's death. Such hypothesizing is both healthy and understandable; political analysis must be based on assumed probabilities even if access to the source is barred. What is startling and disturbing in the recent wave of reassessments is the ease with which the view has spread that Nikita Khrushchev was in fact constrained to act as he did; that he was (as one authority put it) "under strong pressure" or (as another writes) a "prisoner," a tool of nefarious hidden forces.

To the best of our knowledge, I submit, this is simply not so.

The legend of the chained Nikita includes three evil spirits, which operate either singly or together, depending on whose version you read. These are The Military, The Stalinists and The Chinese.

So far as the Soviet military is concerned, it will be well to remember, first of all, that it has never constituted a united political force. It has been faction-ridden and divided on important problems of military (and, implicitly, foreign) policy. But it has never been in a position to challenge the political leadership. Soviet marshals and generals are members of the Communist party, almost to a man, and they accept Party discipline in political affairs. From Frunze and Tukhachevsky to Zhukov (surely, men more powerful and more popular than the Konevs and Malinovskys of today), the military leaders have been, in the last analysis, at the mercy of the dictator, who has been able to dispose of them as he saw fit. There is no evidence whatever that this relationship has changed.

If in 1955-56 there could be any doubt about the priority of the Communist party, it was emphatically and unmistakably removed in 1957. The tightening of controls and the struggle against "revisionism" included among its various manifestations the reinforcement of political control over the armed forces. Since then the priority of the Party—in word and in fact—has explicitly been raised to unprecedented heights. And the image of Marshal Rodion Malinovsky following Khrushchev's every step in and out of Paris as a watchdog of the hidden junta in Moscow is too silly to take serious!

As for the Stalinists, the question is, of course, "Who are they?" Invariably, speculation centers on Mikhail Suslov as the leader or spokesman of this "camp." Granting for the sake of argument that Suslov represents a "tougher" line than Khrushchev, what are his levers of power and who are the others who back him in the top echelons of the Kremlin? Either one grants the reality of some measure of collective decision-making there—and then Khrushchev's complete and systematic packing and control of the Party Presidium, Central Committee and Secretariat must be clearly recognized (the changing relationship among these three bodies is irrelevant for our purposes, as Khrushchev now fully controls all three); or else one assumes that numbers and majorities do not matter in these bodies—and then there would be no reason to believe that a hostile but victorious Suslov would continue to tolerate Khrushchev in power if he could dispense with him (much as the Molotov-Malenkov bloc would have dispensed with him in 1957).

If one trend emerges unmistakably from the various personnel shifts in the Soviet Government and Communist party leadership in recent years, it is the almost uninterrupted consolidation of control by the Khrushchev machine and the elimination of any power base for a possible challenger. The latest shifts, including Frol Kozlov's and Leonid Brezhnev's reappointments, merely underscore